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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a description of police research problems in such fashion that it could be generalized to other types of organizations. A two-dimensional taxonomy of problems in conducting psychological research in police departments is discussed. The first dimension concerns generality-uniqueness of the problem, relative to formal organizations in general, and includes common problems, similar problems, and unique problems. The second dimension discusses the source of the problem, and includes: (1) nature of the psychologist-researcher; (2) nature of the police officer; (3) nature of the psychologist-police officer interaction; and (4) nature of the police organization and police role. (Author/JLL)

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PROBLEMS OF CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONS: THE CASE OF POLICE DEPARTMENTS[1]

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PROBLEMS OF CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONS: THE CASE OF POLICE DEPARTMENTS[1]

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Although more and more psychologists are gaining experience in working with police officers and police departments, rather little has been written concerning their experiences. Some notable exceptions are articles by Bard (1975) and Hillgren and Jacobs (1976), who discuss some significant issues in the research-consulting process. Parts of this article draw upon their observations.

The purpose of this paper is to present a somewhat more formalistic description of police research problems, in such fashion that it might be generalized to other types of organizations. Consequently, one begins to think in terms of categorizing the problems, which leads to the development of a tentative taxonomy.

A Taxonomy of Problems in Police Research

Table 1 presents an outline of a two-dimensional taxonomy of problems with some illustrative examples. One dimension may be conceived of as a continuous variable referring to the relative degree of generality-uniqueness of the problem, vis-a-vis formal organizations in general. The second consists of a nominal categorization of the sources of such problems.

Dimension I. Relative Uniqueness of the Problem

A. Problems common to the conduct of research in virtually any and all formal organizations.

In this category would fall difficulties related to possible conflicts between the aims and procedures of the research and the continuing goals of the organization, the drawbacks associated with being either a part-time or full-time member of the organization, and the need to become familiar with the history of the organization, its structure and functioning, key personnel,

etc. Also included would be methodological problems such as the difficulty of assigning subjects randomly to experimental and control groups for evaluation research (or even simply obtaining agreement that there should be control groups). These are matters addressed by the presentations of Boehm and Goldstein in this symposium.

B. Problems that may be similar or common to the conduct of research in many formal organizations, but which are more significant and/or severe in the case of Police Departments.

For example, the customary inertia that affects most organizations in the maintenance of existing policies and procedures is reinforced by the existence of statutory and judicial limits and prescriptions far in excess of the federal regulations on fair employment discussed by Bartlett. These constraints refer to the organization's "boundary activities" (rules of evidence, prisoner treatment, citizen rights, etc.), as well as to internal functioning (civil service regulations re employment, promotion examinations, et al.). In addition, the paramilitary nature of the organization seems to foster a more directive, if not authoritarian-compliant leadership style than one usually encounters in civilian organizations.

C. Problems relatively unique to the conduct of research in police organizations.

Salient, here, is the atheoretical, even anti-research orientation of many police personnel--often coupled with a special antipathy to psychologists (to be discussed further). "Research", in this view, provides little but publications, income, and perhaps promotion for the researcher. Accordingly, but also because of the limited financial resources of most municipal agencies, psychological research is rarely funded in-house, leading to further difficulties in problem-definition and "ownership" of the research.

Dimension II. Source(s) of the Problem

The source, or origin of the problem is considered, here, as distinct from the specific ways in which a problem may be manifested (i.e. the "content" of the problem). For example, the manifestation of a problem might be the lack of acceptance of a performance review system that was developed by an I/O psychologist. But the sources of that problem may have to do with the police officers' stereotyped notions about psychologists and what the psychologists are actually trying to accomplish, or the current state of conflict between police rank-and-file and command.

The distinction between source and content also emphasizes the possibility of multiple sources for any manifest problem.

A. The nature of the Psychologist (or "Social Scientist," "Researcher," or "Consultant").

and

B. The nature of the Police Officer.

It seems to make sense to talk about these two categories together because some of the more interesting difficulties concern virtual "mirror image differences" in the attributes of the two groups. (Moreover, the one thing they undoubtedly share is limited first-hand knowledge of each other.) These mirror-image characteristics both reflect and contribute to a general lack of fit in socio-economic class backgrounds, primary and secondary socialization experiences, value systems, etc. These are apt to be felt not only in the routine interpersonal encounters between the two groups, but also with respect to their respective views concerning "needed changes" (which, and how much) in the Police organization.

1. Approach to Problems.

Psychologists tend to have, if not reflective, at least a "scientific" approach to problems. Our bias is to contemplate alternative

hypotheses, collect relevant data under as controlled conditions as possible, and to express "answers" (if any are forthcoming) in probabilistic terms.

Police Officers tend to be rather impulsive risk-takers (see Lefkowitz, 1975). They are also often faced with pragmatic problems (if not crises) that appear to demand quick and decisive responses. Their "answers" usually are expressed in clear-cut binary terms (yes-no) that ignore the shades of gray. Those of us who have given expert testimony in court and have been required to answer complex questions with a simple "yes" or "no" (e.g. "Is the test valid?") can appreciate the disparity in orientations.

2. Approach to Human Behavior.

Most psychologists, if we have undergone appropriate occupational socialization, accept the principle of psychological determinism. Behavior is, at least theoretically if not in every instance, amenable to explanation in generally causal terms. Many of us are even sufficiently curious or otherwise motivated to actually try to do so.

On the other hand, police often seem to share, with many others, a straightforward, no-nonsense non-introspective, somewhat moralistic belief in "free will" that obviates the need for any other explanations of behavior. That is, in response to the question "Why?", the answer is that people do things simply because they, want to -- period! Nowhere is this cosmological difference so apparent as in the (clinical) psychologist's attempt to understand or explain criminal behavior, which as pointed out by Meehl (1970), is usually interpreted by police as "excusing" that behavior.

3. Personal and Political Ideology.

Psychologists tend to have a somewhat progressive or even liberal political and social ideology in contrast to the conservatism of most police officers (see Lefkowitz, 1975). Although this discrepancy is probably less in the case of the somewhat more conservative I/O psychologist,

important differences remain with regard to the I/O psychologist's readiness to introduce organizational changes, vs. the police officer's customary preoccupation with preserving the existing order. For example, it has been observed that the relative unsophistication of police management practices is due to the lack of implementation of available practices even after they have been demonstrated effective (see Lefkowitz, 1977).

4. Status Needs and Expertise.

Psychologists often manifest high status needs and the need to be perceived and related to as "experts." Some observers feel that psychologists have even been known to approach police with what is perceived as an arrogant attitude (Hillgren & Jacobs, 1976).

On the other hand, police officers also seem to have strong status concerns--apparently related to lack of personal self-confidence, low occupational prestige, and a preoccupation with maintaining "self-respect" (see Lefkowitz, 1975). This is reinforced by their view that only police officers can fully comprehend police problems, which is one aspect of the pervasive "us vs. them" thinking that promotes extreme levels of group cohesiveness, social isolation, suspiciousness and defensiveness concerning "outsiders."

One could not imagine a poorer "fit" than the somewhat haughty "outside expert" with little or no prior experience in law enforcement, coming in to "do research" or to "help" this cynical, somewhat defensive, and extremely suspicious organization. Most psychologists who have worked in police departments as "experts"--e.g. conducting a management training program--can recall instances of almost or actually being drawn into decision-making situations (actual or hypothetical) that were outside his or her appropriate role and expertise. (Few things test one's insight into human behavior like the kinds

of anecdotes and situations the experienced police officer can offer, often while you are in front of a group of officers, in the form of "What would you do?")

C. The Nature of Police - Psychologist Interactions.

Obviously, the previously noted mirror-image attributes of these two groups imply considerable difficulties in their interpersonal encounters. Beyond these, however, are sources of difficulty relating to the role relationships that partly define the nature of the interaction, as well as their a priori perceptions, biases, stereotypes, and expectations of each other.

1. Prior Exposure of Each to the Other.

The general absence of contact between these two groups has already been noted. But more importantly, the limited contact that ordinarily occurs is likely to be of the circumscribed sort that promotes biased and/or incomplete knowledge. I/O psychologists are likely to have encountered police officers (as is true of most citizens) only in the performance of some aspect of their authoritative role--e.g. having received a speeding violation. Even more significant is the likely exposure of the police officer only to the (clinical) psychologist who sought to screen him out from the selection process, or remove him from active duty as "psychologically unfit." This negative screening approach to selection has been referred to pejoratively as the "search for pathology" (Lefkowitz, 1977).

The second most frequent scenario in which police may recently have encountered psychologists in the police organization is as researchers who have used the organization for research purposes. In many instances the organization passively cooperates with the project while the researcher concentrates on "getting the data and getting out"--leaving behind little of value to the organization (Baird, 1975).

2. Biases, Stereotypes, Expectations.

The generally limited and circumscribed contact of each group with the other serves to reinforce the general occupational stereotypes that each is likely to have of the other ("egghead" vs. "hard head"). These biases and expectations are likely to lead to misperceptions even when actual contact is increased--misperceptions that hamper the development of an effective working relationship. For example, after administration of the first attitude questionnaires I undertook with police 10 years ago, and which contained a scale of "Anti-Negro Ideology," a colleague and I were purposefully allowed to "overhear" a Lieutenant's comments to another officer. This hard-boiled, experienced officer said, more loudly than was necessary for his friend standing next to him, "well, I answered those nigger questions right." Having not long been out of Grad school, and having learned of social desirability response sets, and having had very little contact with policemen, I immediately assumed that he was bragging about having "seen through" the items and avoided the "trap" of appearing prejudiced. In fact, as we learned later, what he meant sarcastically was that he had answered all those items in the most prejudiced direction, defiantly confirming (his cynical expectation of) our stereotype about police. What his genuine attitudes are in this context, are irrelevant.

3. The Nature of Collaboration.

Bard (1975) was probably the first to question the nature of how law enforcement and the social sciences were working together. He pointed out that the relations between the two systems might be best characterized as a temporary "marriage of convenience" in which each system tolerates the other for short-term gain. As noted earlier, the police department tends to assume a passively cooperative posture, allowing itself to be "done to" while we "get the data and get out."

I would add that an additional bar to the meaningful collaboration called for by Bard (beyond the myopic concern for a limited set of data) is the reluctance of psychologists to train organizational members to carry out meaningful aspects of a project (i.e. revealing the "tricks of the trade"). That would too seriously question our status as "expert." But on the other hand it must be observed that the researcher is less likely, in comparison with civilian industrial organizations, to encounter organizational members with the requisite background and training.

However, it seems plausible that, given the interest in doing so, a truly collaborative relationship can be developed. Bard describes a program in which

> "the responsibility and accountability for every aspect of the current project are being coequally shared by the Police Department (and some of its members) and the university and some of its social scientists. Police practitioners actively participate in every stage of the process, including research design, data collection procedures, and data analysis" (1975,p.129).

4. Employment Status of the Psychologist.

There are essentially three forms of relationship under which the research psychologist may be working with the police organization: (a) as a regular full-time member of the staff; (b) as a full-time employee on temporary assignment (e.g. for the duration of a project or contract); (c) as a part-time researcher or consultant. The crucial distinction is probably simply full-time vs. part-time. And both alternatives have their advantages and disadvantages that are familiar to most I/O psychologists.

Even as a full-time member of the organization, one is generally still perceived as a civilian "outsider" (often, as part of the municipal

government administration, hence "political"). But more dangerously, a civilian who has "infiltrated" and who may undermine traditional police practices. At best, one may start off being viewed as a dangerous (albeit sometimes useful) "pipeline to management." Some police psychologists, perhaps partly in response to this issue, have become regular sworn police officers.

D. The Nature of the Police Organization & Role.

1. Organizational Inertia.

The customary difficulties in achieving meaningful, long-term changes in bureaucratic organizations are especially apparent in police departments. Earlier note was taken of the legal constraints on both the internal functioning of the police department and its dealings with the citizenry. More fundamental, perhaps, is that an essential attribute of the police function in society -- maintaining order -- promotes a conservative interest in preserving the status quo. That outlook seems to pervade all aspects of organizational functioning, to the detriment of most "change" programs.

2. Unsophisticated Management.

Various long-time students of law enforcement have observed (see Lefkowitz, 1977) that police departments "are about the most poorly managed organizations in our society," and are "not too bright at top levels" (p. 350). Others have observed that police department managers tend to perpetuate the problem by fostering environments that discourage the continued services of bright, professionally trained careerists. These do not sound like people likely to assume the long-term critical perspective necessary for most research enterprises.

Although these criticisms may be becoming less accurate over the past few years, it still seems true that much more is known about police management than is actually practiced.

Related problems that have been observed include the very high

rate of turnover nationally among police department chief executives (which threatens the continuity of research); higher rates of turnover and lower supervisory performance ratings for the brightest and most motivated young police officers; and organizational restrictions against hiring at levels above the entry position (i.e. "lateral entry") which serve to perpetuate the attenuating influences on capability at the higher levels.

3. Role Conflict.

Many students of law enforcement have observed, and objective job analyses have substantiated, that the expressed organizational goals and primary identity of the police department (crime prevention and apprehension of criminals) are at considerable variance with the most typical realities of the police job (maintenance of public order; administrative-clerical duties; "social work" activities such as responding to family disputes or making psychiatric referrals).

The ramifications of this discrepancy at the individual level, along with the extraordinarily high visibility of the police job, and its relatively low occupational status, contribute to the "culture shock," job dissatisfaction, defensiveness and cynicism so often noted among police officers. Less often noted, however, are disfunctional organizational effects related to decisions concerning resource allocation, training goals, budgeting, performance evaluation, reward structures, etc.

The discrepancy between image (including self-image) and reality is extremely intrusive at the stage of defining a problem for appropriate research or consultative work.

4. Organizational Conflict.

Labor-management issues seem to be extremely salient in police departments. There usually appears to be an antagonistic relationship between the police officer rank-and-file and their command officers -- more so than in many segments of private industry. (Why that should be so has not been well

explained, and is rather paradoxical given the common socioeconomic class backgrounds and job experiences of both groups; promotion to command is exclusively from within, up through the ranks.)

Because the researcher generally "enters" the organization via command levels (in order to gain the needed administrative and fiscal approvals for the project), he or she becomes identified initially as "one of them" by the rank-and-file. This, of course, exacerbates all of the customary difficulties of the organizational interventionist regarding acceptance, confidentiality, and the question of who is the "client" or "beneficiary" of the research (organizational members dealt with, or the senior management that controls access and remuneration?).

This difficulty potentiates the previously noted difficulties surrounding the employment status of the psychologist, so that one may be perceived simultaneously as both an "outsider" and an antagonistic party to intra-organizational conflict.

5. The Need for Immediately Applicable Solutions.

Police departments and (to only a somewhat lesser extent), the external funding agencies that support police research, are concerned primarily with projects that are aimed at achieving immediately applicable solutions to current pragmatic problems. Funding and administrative cooperation tend to be extremely difficult to obtain in the absence of virtual "guarantees", of such results. The temptation to offer such assurances presents an ethical difficulty because even "applied" research often does not yield -- is sometimes not even designed to yield -- operational results that are readily applicable to policies or procedures for personnel practices.

It is probably true that industrial-organizational psychologists with backgrounds in applied personnel research, are more "in tune" with this attitude than are other psychologists, but that reduces the difficulty only modestly.

6. Sources of Funding.

Police departments rarely have the budget flexibility to support research directly; funding is generally external to the department (from

Universities, Federal Government Agencies, private foundations). And along with lack of budget control often goes lack of input into the problem-definition and design phases of the activity. Consequently, the police organization, even if passively "cooperating" with the research may have little commitment or sense of "ownership" over it. Hillgren and Jacobs (1976) point out that "without 'internal' funding support, the most cost-effective use of the psychologist will not be realized and professional services will be 'needed' only when external funding is available" (p. 263-264).

I hope it is apparent that this overall categorization of problems is not offered as a formal taxonomy. There are too many formalistic weaknesses for that: the unknown reliability of classification among the 12-category (3 x 4) system; the arbitrariness of the points chosen for illustration along the continuum of Dimension I, etc. Its value, if any, is more that of a simple, informal aid to characterizing the issues and thinking about their origins, solution, and prevention.

Note should be taken of the very limited discussion of the consequences, manifestations, or "content" of the problems that may derive from these sources of difficulty. The researcher is likely to encounter an operational difficulty at its manifest level, prior to learning, if he or she ever does, its underlying source. Hopefully this presentation can aid the process of understanding more quickly the etiologic sources of such problems.

Advantages of Conducting Research in Police Departments

Although not a primary focus of this presentation, it seems important to end on a more optimistic note. That is because, despite the sorts of difficulties described above, organizational research with police

departments is, on balance, considerably more rewarding than disappointing. Some of the positive experiences relate to:

1. Receptiveness of Many Police Personnel.

Police departments have, over the past 10 years or so, been attracting increased numbers of recruits who are better-educated and less bound to prior tradition. Some of these men are now in positions of Command, as well. While still pragmatically oriented, these officers appear extremely willing to learn, provided it can be demonstrated effectively and economically that research will have some tangible benefits for the organization.

2. Methodological Advantages.

In comparison with organizational research in general, the police department offers several design and procedural advantages. For example, one has available for analyses relatively large cohorts of officers, virtually all hired at the same time, via identical screening procedures, undergoing identical training, and placed initially on virtually identical jobs. The potential value of selection research, criterion development, longitudinal studies, and in general, the "experimental control" offered by such communalities (in relation to the study of individual differences and/or alternative treatment conditions) is great.

3. Meaningfulness of Activities.

One often experiences, in the conduct of research in police departments, the feeling that one is engaged in significant problem issues -- especially when the work impinges on activities at the organization's external boundaries. (The references listed at the end of this paper contain many examples of the sort of work being done by psychologists.) The chance to impact significantly on the internal operations of a police department as well as the organization's interface with other institutions and the public at-large offers the psychological researcher a good opportunity to feel useful.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]For the purposes of this paper, I've assumed that the term "research" includes both the relatively "pure" kind as well as "applied." The distinction, in any case, is not clear cut, and I mean to include both situations where the research problem is defined primarily by the researcher as a consequence of his or her theoretical notions, and situations where the "research" is more clearly solution-oriented and defined by the organization. Consequently, it may be more appropriate, in some instances, to think of the psychologist as a "consultant" (even if employed full time within the organization) as well as "researcher." The latter term will be used inclusively.

[2]Also at BFS Psychological Associates, Inc.

TABLE 1

A Two-Dimensional Taxonomy of Problems in Conducting Psychological Research in Police Departments, With Some Illustrative Examples

I. Generality-Uniqueness of the problem, relative to formal organizations in general.	II Source Of The Problem			
	A. Nature of the Psychologist-Researcher	B. Nature of the Police Officer (i.e.employees)	C. Nature of the Psychologist-Police Officer Interaction	D. Nature of the Police Organization and Police Role
A. Problems Common to the Conduct of Research in Virtually Any and All Formal Organizations.	-High status needs; need for being considered an "expert," even in the unfamiliar world of law enforcement.	-Limited first-hand exposure to psychologists, or sympathy for psychology's basic premise (the deterministic explanation of behavior).	-Perception of the psychologist as a "pipeline to management." -Limitations of either a full-time or part-time relationship with the organization. -Clarification of "who is the client."	-Difficulty of creating and sustaining organizational changes in bureaucratic organizations. -Contradictions and conflicts of the research activities with ongoing organizational functioning.
B. Problems Similar or Often Common to Formal Organizations, But Which are More Significant and/or Severe in the Case of Police Departments	- Scientific approach to problems, with "answers" expressed in probabilistic terms.	-Need for an immediate, decisive approach to problems with "answers" expressed in binary terms (yes-no). -Conservative outlook and preoccupation with preserving the status quo.	-Biases and stereotypes of psychologists and police--each by the other ("egghead" vs. "hardhead") -Difficulties in liaison, coordination, and follow-up of research activities.	-Relative lack of sophistication in modern management techniques. -Sources of research funding generally other than the police department research site.
C. Problems Relatively Unique to the Conduct of Research in Police Organizations.	-Absence of personal experience with police officers or departments.	-Extreme suspiciousness and mistrust of "outsiders".	- Prior police exposure to psychologists in the form of (a) clinicians who may find him "unfit," or (b) "social scientists" who "get the data and run."	-Expressed organizational goals quite at variance with most frequent job requirements.